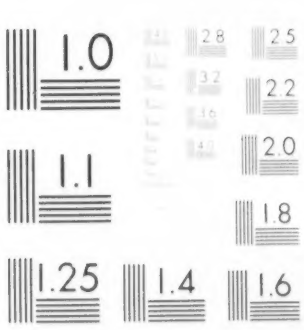

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NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS 1963-A

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the technological and social changes that have effected a new conception of feedback in mass communication called "access." Access to broadcast systems and programming has two components: "off-the-air," where groups representing public interests have developed mechanisms for influencing programming changes; and "on-the-air," where technological developments in miniaturization and cable service have facilitated the individual viewer's exposure to and experience with video hardware and software. The paper concludes that speech communication teachers should provide students with the skills and experiences necessary to achieve both on-the-air and off-the-air access. (Author/RL)

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ACCESS: ON AND OFF THE AIR

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The Theoretical Perspective: Feedback in Mass Communication

In the arena of interpersonal communication the notion of feedback as an essential component of the communicative act has received exhaustive conceptual and empirical treatment.[1] As generally conceived, the process allows for receivers to provide information to senders in response to messages, thereby exerting influence and control on the system and making it interactive.

Traditional paradigms of mass communication, however, have de-emphasized the role of the listener, viewer, or reader as an information source or control point in his or her own right. Feedback to broadcast communication content is described at best as "limited" or "delayed"; at worst as a non-existent link in the theory chain.

The original "mechanistic S-R" theory, for example, identified audience response-behaviors as uniform consequents of the carefully constructed message:

> . . . .powerful stimuli (were) uniformly brought to the attention of the individual members of the mass. These (messages) tapped inner urges, emotions, or other processes over which the individual had little voluntary control.[2]

The possibility of audience response providing any "thermostatic" information back to the source was nil; targeted audiences either did as they were told, or they did nothing.

The "Two-Step Flow" approach broadened the conception of the role of the audience in the mass communication process.[3] Within the "gesellschaft" Katz and Lazarsfeld uncovered the persuasive presence of opinion-leaders who buffered, filtered, and re-encoded media messages for mass consumption. Themselves audience-members, these agents of personal influence could modify recent and possibly alter subsequent message content.[4] In this model, then, "feedback" existed though it was not formally specified nor delineated in the lexicon. While it was possible for O.L.'s to exert such control, in the American broadcast system it remained unlikely that they had the means or status to effect it. "Feedback" though feasible, was limited.

The "Two-Step Flow" has been contemporaneously refined to include a multiplicity of filtration stages between source and receiver.[5] Unfortunately, the multi-step formulations (variously labelled "individual differences," "social categories" or "social relationships") do not posit a more active role for the communication-consumer. Indeed, the original message changes hands so often that recipiocal control by receivers is both spatially and conceptually abstracted. The process remains linear, one-way, and essentially static. Theorists particularly concerned with media audiences often align receivers with passive, ex-pos-facto behaviors. Loevinger's "Reflective-Projective" theory, for example, maintains that audiences use communication content as mirrors for identification of self and society.[6] The television screen here is a cathode-ray Rorschach: "the members of the audience project . . . (their) own ideas into the ink-blots."[7] The notion of feedback is irrelevant; information controllers are providing a "sampler" of social roles, an assortment of cultural identities. This is often the theoretical banner carried by broadcast industry spokespersons: programming content is solely the "egg" hatched by the cultural "chicken" or TV is merely a "window on the world." Thus conceived, mass media are dismissed as divertissments for the masses -- "most unlikely to become instruments of social reform or great public enlightenment."[8]

Similarly, Stephenson's "Play Theory" identifies media audiences with passive escapism.[9] The subjective play experience of the adult television viewer, for example, becomes a ritual replay of child life. While mass media content thus conceived offers beneficial effects (such as tension and anxiety reduction) it seems wasteful to ascribe the voluminous output of the media machinery to such apparent frivolity and pejoritive to conceive of the audience in such a undimensional frame.

The above theories are prototypes of a larger current thrust known as "functionalism."[10] The key element in this sociologically-based set of

empirical formulations is utility: audiences are perceived to use media content for various culturally-biased reasons, e.g. identity, reinforcement, entertainment, surveillance, etc. Again "feedback" as an essential component of the act of mediated communication is immaterial; messages off the tube are ends in themselves, used in a self-reflexive, isolated environment. The viewer is essentially atomistic, distant, and powerless. Commenting on feedback and media theory, Head summarizes:

> In intimate face-to-face verbal communication, visual and auditory cues continuously tell a speaker about audience reactions. He can respond by adjusting what he says and how he says it from moment to moment. Lacking this sensitive and immediate give-and-take, mass media operate at a (severe) disadvantage.[11]

Not surprisingly, the above theories, with their dim view of receiver imput and generally limited conception of audience characteristics and behaviors, grew out of an era of unbridled media growth and popular acceptance. Television, for example, had risen to pop-cult prominance in an era of homogenized culture, suppressed dissidence, and social conformity: the 1950's. As Bogart has surmised: "the ubiquitous TV antenna (was) a symbol of people seeking -- and getting -- the identical message."[12]

The TV information sources -- the three networks -- quickly consolidated into an oligarchic structure, scarcely resembling the original guideline philosophy set by the Federal Communications Act of 1934: "the airways belong to the people." The product, like the audience, remained generally static: enduring philosophies of strategic programming emerged such as "L. C. D." and "L. O. P."[13]

Against this backdrop of uniformity, stability, and homeostasis, prevailing theories of broadcast communication worked well. However, the occurrance of two phenomena -- one technological, one socio-cultural -- have forced a re-examination of the mediated communication event. The concept of feedback has been refined and re-defined under the umbrella term "Access." No longer can

the viewer be conceived as an isolated, atomistic media "user": he is at once a controller, an "actor," and a change-agent.

The Socio-Cultural Phenomenon: Access Off The Air

With the rise of public protest and the growth of the "consumer movement" identified with Ralph Nader and his associates in the late sixties, came television citizens group activity.

Motivated by the unpopular war in Southeast Asia, dissident students demonstrated against "the Establishment." Inspired by powerful rhetoric from its leaders and spurred by the assasination of Martin Luther King, the Civil Rights movement accelerated. Questioning the morality, efficiency, and "success" of male-dominated social and political life, women began to ally and demonstrate for equal rights. While media audiences were changing, stratifying, solidifying, and searching for their own messages, television was delivering the same monotonal images.[14] Individuals became disgruntled with TV content and the superstructure that manufactured and delivered it. Spontaneous group formations founded on proximity began to give shape and power to the nascent movement.

Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children's Television, began holding weekly meetings in Spring, 1968 with neighbors who shared her concern with "kidvid" content.[15] Albert Kramer, founder of the Citizens Communication Center in Washington, D. C., began a phase of community organizing and mobilization.[16] Other "opinion leaders" began to broaden their personal influence channels in similar fashion: both the National Parent-Teachers Organization (P.T.A.) and the United Church of Christ, for example, used their extant social networks to locate individuals concerned about TV fare. Too, womens' groups and black rights alliances quickly formed off-shoot TV/Radio Interest Councils after the development and consolidation of larger group

identity. With identity and solidarity firmly established, citizens' groups subsequently developed viable tools to exert influence on television programming.[16] Among the most powerful has been the "petition-to-deny" wherein citizens legally challenge stations' license renewals before the F. C. C. This strategy emerged from the landmark WLBT case in 1966 which established the right of representatives of groups in the general public to have legal access to the renewal process, a decision linked to antecedent consumer lobbying against inferior margarine and bus service.[17]

Another finely-honed technique has been the effort toward re-education of the television viewer, a topic adequately covered by my colleague. TV T-group activity holds enormous potential for change in the prevailing broadcasting system.

To date, the most effective feedback channel from citizens groups to the broadcasting hierarchy has been the development of legal and bureaucratic machinery to combat the lobbying tentacles of the industry. Pressure groups such as the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, led by former F. C. C. Commissioner Nicholas Johnson have set up shop within earshot of the N.A.B., N.A.M.P.T.E., A.F.T.R.A., etc.; and government regulatory watchdogs: the F.C.C., F.T.C., H.E.W., Senate and House Committees and Subcommittees, etc. The burgeoning specialty "Communications Law" has spurred a glut of talented lawyers in behalf of concerned citizens groups. The isolated griping phone call by the irate or outraged viewer has yielded to effective legal arguments in the Judiciary. In regard to television programming content, television access groups have made substantial inroads in the following content areas:

a. quality of childrens programming,
b. commercial time in "Kidvid,"
c. accuracy in advertising claims,
d. amount of violent programming,
e. network control of affiliated stations,
f. accuracy and fairness in news and editorial reportage.

Thus, traditional notions of the broadcast audience as a large, undifferentiated, inchoate mass are antiquated; feedback, i.e., "Access off the air" is a dynamic, immediate, potentially limitless force for "disequilibrium" and for making the networks more responsive to public needs.

The Technological Phenomenon: Access On The Air

In 1967, Sony invented a battery operated, hand-held portable VTR recording system which could be used with its own lightweight camera.[18] In 1969, they marketed a self contained record-playback VTR system which effectively altered the basic production structure of television from the confines of the large, expensive, and rigorously controlled studio to the freedom and unpredictibility of the "real world." The "Portapak" and concomitant miniaturization of video technology soon combined with another technical development: CATV and Public Access.[19] Cable television had arisen in the 1950's as an answer to problems with open-circuit reception in mountainous and rural areas. But in the 1960's, the possibilities of using coaxial cable as a channel for alternative, non-network programming, particularly in the late sixties, began to be explored. By 1972, the F.C.C. specifically required each cable operator to make a channel available to the public on a first-come, first-serve basis.[20]

The combination of the technical developments of miniaturization and cable TV, plus other "miracles" have also had an impact on the traditional notions of receiver feedback in mass communication and could potentially alter the entire teleivsion industry.

From the first, the Portapak was seen as a means of offering new (albeit bizarre and often incoherent) messages and imagery to a hungry and eager subculture.[21] While over the past eight years, the "Portapak-as-revolution" credo has lost some steam, proponents of small format television have made marked inroads into the prevailing industry structure. Video groups such as TVTV (Top-Value Television) have appeared on Public and commercial television;

"insta-cams" and "E.N.G." units are now a staple of most large market local news stations; regular commercial television shows make extensive use of the techniques mastered by "videofreex."

The most portentious off-shoot of the portability/cable revolution has been easy access of "average citizens" to video technology. Hands-on experience in front of and behind the camera at least constitutes instant de-mythification of the television super-structure and at most may undermine the prevailing oligopoly.

The current model of television as a "few to many" proposition may likely give way to a revised "many-to-few" conceptualization.[22] This potential change is already noted with the emergence of "video-art"; Nam June Paik, William Wegman, Peter Crown and others have demonstrated that, like film, print, and audio technology before it, the television camera and screen can be used as a new means of expression and creativity.[23] The process will likely filter into the mainstream as home video recording becomes more widespread. Indeed, firms such as "New Line Cinema" and "Video Tape Network" have already marketed feature films and "blue" movies for sale to "Betamax" and 3/4" cassette owners. We are likely in store for a "mini-comm" era in television: wherein stratified special-interest messages specifically designed for audience subgroups are produced and distributed.[24] There are ample signals that this trend is emerging. The popularity of interchangeable and programmable video games has turned a lot of homescreens into CRT's; network concern over this audience-threat has sent minor ripples, if not shock-waves through the industry. In the long run, however, the most fundamental change in the prevailing broadcasting system may be brought about by the development of "interactive" television. Combining cable technology with existing vidifont and character-generator capabilities has made two-way television a reality. Already in operation in model applications, this new structure will certainly undermine the current

one-way flow of television content. In a sense, we will all be producers, directors, i.e. "gatekeepers"; the "feedback" channel will be opened wide and television will more closely align with models of interpersonal communication.

This potential reconceptualization has already surfaced in the video mainstream. An ad for the Zenith equivalent of Sony's "Betamax" depicts a typical "male, white, 25-49" exercising viewer control over the almighty networks: "I watch the shows when I want to." It's TV on the audience's own terms.

Conclusion

Traditional conceptions of feedback in mass communication have been reviewed and revealed to be out-of-date because of both technological and social changes in the American social and broadcast systems. A new conception of feedback labelled "Access" has been delineated. It is found to have two components: "off-the-air," wherein groups representing interests in the general public have developed mechanisms for programming change, and "on-the-air," wherein technological developments in miniaturization and cable have facilitated exposure to and experience with video hardware and software.

As broadcast educators, it is our charge to become familiar with these new developments and to revise our static conceptions of a "one-way" mass media system, particularly in broadcasting. In addition to developing heightened critical/evaluative skills in our students as my colleague suggests, we must facilitate hands-on experience with new technologies and rhetorical strategies. Technical instruction should be expanded out-of-studio and internships with citizens and media lobby groups should be set up. The goal, of course, is to reduce the population of what Jerzy Kosinsky has called "videots:"

> . . . .the children who spend five or six hours watching television every day, and . . .when in groups . . .cannot interact . . . They are terrified of each other . . . they want to watch, . . . not be

spoken to. They want to watch . . . not to talk. They want to watch, they don't want to be asked questions or singled out.[25]

We can and must make them stop "watching" and start "do-ing."

NOTES

1. See Donald A. Clement and Kenneth D. Frandsen, "On Conceptual and Empirical Treatments of Feedback in Human Communication," Communication Monographs, 43 (March, 1976), pp. 11-28.

2. Melvin L. DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, Theories of Mass Communication, Third Edition (New York: D. McKay Co., 1976), p. 159.

3. See Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, Personal Influence, (Glenco, Illinois: Free Press, 1954).

4. IBID.

5. See, for example, P. Deutschman, "Diffusion of Knowledge of a Major News Story," Journalism Quarterly, 27 (1960), pp. 345-55, and Sydney Head, Broadcasting in America (Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1976), p. 464.

6. Lee Loevinger, "The Amb uous Minor: The Reflective-Projective Theory of Broadcasting." Journal of Broadcasting, 12:2 (Spring, 1968), pp. 97-114.

7. IBID., p. 108.

8. IBID., p. 109.

9. William Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

10. See, for example, Charles Wright, Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective, (New York: Random House, 1959), pp. 17-23.

11. See Head, op. cit., p. 465.

12. Leo Bogart, The Age of Television, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1956), p. 5.

13. "L. C. D." refers to the "Lowest Common Denominator" assumption in programming; "L. O. P." is the acronym for "Least Objectionable Program." For detail, see Head, op. cit., pp. 252-253.

14. See Joseph Dominick and Millard Pearce, "Trends in Network Prime-Time Programming, 1953-73," Journal of Communication, 26:1 (Winter, 1976), pp. 70-80.

15. See "Access In/To Boston," Access, 2:29 (1976), pp. 4-12.

16. IBID.

17. See Head, op. cit., pp. 445-446.

18. Don Harwood, Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Video Tape Recording, (New York: VTR Pub. Co., 1974), p. 11. Further discussion of VTR history emerges from this volume.

19. For a discussion of Cable TV see Ted Smythe and George Mastroianni, Issues in Broadcasting, (Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 275-337. For an evaluation of a public access system, see Alan Wurtzel, "The Electronic Neighbor: A Content Analysis of Public Access Channel Programming on a New York City Cable Television System," paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, December, 1974.

20. Wurtzel, op. cit., p. 1.

21. See for example, Michael Shamberg and the Raindance Corporation Guerilla Television, (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1971), and "Videofreex," The Spaghetti City Manual, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973).

22. See James McCroskey and Lawrence Wheeless, Introduction to Human Communication, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976), pp. 53-69.

23. See the P. B. S. series "VTR: Video and Television Review" hosted by Russell Connor.

24. See Gary Gumpert, "The Rise of Mini-Comm," Journal of Communication, 20:3 (September, 1970), pp. 280-290.

25. David Sohn, "A Nation of Videots: An Interview with Jerzy Kosinsky," in Barry L. Sherman "Readings on the History of Television," (Penn State University Mimeo), 1976. Copies available from the author.